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ABSTRACT

Responding to students' needs for systematic advice about their writing, a city university developed a voluntary test using student writing samples to evaluate punctuation and grammar, diction, sentence structure, and organization and development. Evaluation of 100 test results revealed that these students, all working adults, showed more control over mechanics than over organization and development. Although all but 10 of the students had had previous college writing instruction, only 23% of the sample received a satisfactory score. After receiving their diagnostic test results, one-quarter of those eventually receiving degree candidacy registered for a nonrequired first-level writing course. These findings suggest the following: (1) a self-instruction format for teaching editing skills could free needed class time for work on more difficult problems with idea organization and development; (2) if given information about their writing problems, adult students will voluntarily register for additional instruction; and (3) instruction alone is not enough to improve writing skills--teachers in all subjects need to stress writing's value as an aid to both communicating and learning. (Test results and a profile of the tested population are appended.) (MM)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT STUDENTS' WRITING

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CS 207809

Miriam Meyers
MCTE Presentation
May 6, 1983

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT STUDENTS' WRITING

At the 1982 NCTE Convention in Washington, D.C., Richard Larson reported on "Where We Have Been Going and Are Going Now in Writing About Composition," presumably from his vantage point as editor of the CCCC journal. In his list of five items, he included "Studies of Adult Writers: who they are, what special problems they present, and how they can best be approached." This interested me because I have been working with what is called the returning adult student for almost twelve years now, both in writing courses and in other courses in which as instructor I place high priority on helping students improve their writing. Our writing faculty, moreover, keep on eye on the literature in composition, and some of us have conducted searches on adult students' writing, with poor results. Much of the research now being reported focusses on what adults write on the job, and work in this vein, such as that by Odell and Goswami,[1] Van Dyck,[2] and Loris[3] is certainly helpful to us as we think about the situations in which our students are most likely to apply what they take away from writing instruction. It is not particularly useful, though, in directing our attention to the skills and needs adult students bring when they come to us for help.

My purpose here is to add to our sparse knowledge on who returning adult students are and what their writing is like by reporting on some research I've begun to do based on Metropolitan State University's diagnostic testing program. First, I should say a word about Metro U.

Metro U was established as an upper division college by the Minnesota Legislature in May of 1971. Its students are older than the traditional 18- to 22-year-olds and are fully employed, inside or outside of the home, as well

as being spouses, parents, and fully functioning members of various other communities. They need flexible, individualized degree programs that allow them to complete their B.A. degrees in ways that take account of their lives and are respectful of their previous education.

Though most students enrolling at Metro have had at least two years of postsecondary education, from the beginning our students showed a need for help with their writing. A writing program thus developed to meet that need. The curriculum includes four developmental writing workshops, two first-level writing courses (General Writing and Writing for Work, parallel expository writing courses with slightly different emphases) and specialized writing courses focussed on professional or avocational (our students would say "creative") kinds of writing.

As Metro U enrollment increased, the need became apparent for a systematic way to give students advice about their writing. Two years ago, we began a program to test all entering students' writing, on a voluntary basis, during the first course students take--the Individualized Educational Planning course. It is in this course that students plan the rest of their B.A. degree program; only upon successful completion of the course is degree candidacy granted.

The test is based on a writing sample from each student, the topic for which conforms to the purpose of the course. Three trained readers score the sample using a 22-item analytical scoring process. We then give students a diagnostic summary addressing five major issues in their writing: punctuation, grammar and diction, sentence structure, organization and development. Further, we advise them of appropriate ways to work on their writing, including enrollment in courses and workshops and use of the writing tutor.

That is the context. Now I want to move on to the research. I chose 100 students randomly from the fall 1981 entering class and looked at their

performance on the diagnostic test and at their characteristics. Here is what I found:

> In a possible range of 0 to 92 points, the average score was 51.56, the median score 51, and the range 35 to 67. (Look at item 1 on your handout.)

Handout Item #1 AVERAGE SCORE 51.57
MEDIAN SCORE 51

AVERAGE COMPONENT SCORES		ADJUSTED (a)
Punctuation	8	13
Sentence Structure	12	12
Grammar and diction	11	11
Organization	11	11
Development	10	10

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS MAKING SCORES IN FOUR RANGES:

0-45	21%	(Weak)
46-58	56%	(Not well developed...)
59-70	23%	(Satisfactory, but not strong)
71-92	0	(Significant asset)

Here is the distribution of scores. (Overhead #1, appended)

These results indicate that, like the younger students tested in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, adult students have more control of the mechanics of writing than of organization and development of ideas.[4] The results are consistent as well with a fall 1982 informal survey of Metro U core faculty regarding students' writing competence and with the judgment of Bob Gremore, who directs the Metro U writing program and supervises the diagnostic testing. Pearl Aldrich found the same pattern of problems in adults' writing on the job.[5]

I was curious about whether or not the pattern of component scores would obtain for those making in the lowest range and those making in the highest range (in this sample, the satisfactory range). Look at item #2 on your handout for what I found.

Handout Item #2 COMPONENT SCORES OF THOSE MAKING IN 59 - 70 RANGE

Punctuation	Sentence Structure	Diction	Organization	Development
9 (16a)	14	13	13	12

COMPONENT SCORES OF THOSE MAKING 0 - 45

Punctuation	Sentence Structure	Diction	Organization	Development
7 (11a)	10	9	9	8

I was curious, too, about the pattern of scores in the two components in which everyone as a group scored highest and lowest--punctuation and development, respectively. Here are the figures on that. (Overheads #2 and #3, appended)

Item #3 on your handout gives averages for certain populations within the 100 student sample.

Handout Item #3 AVERAGE SCORE OF ENTERING STUDENTS 25 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER (n=10) 50

AVERAGE SCORE OF ENTERING STUDENTS 43 YEARS OLD OR OR OLDER (n=14) 52

AVERAGE SCORES OF TRANSFERS FROM:

Minnesota Community Colleges	(n=37)	50
University of Minnesota	(n=26)	52
Other States	(n=12)	55
AVTI's	(n=9)	50
State Universities Minnesota	(n=9)	53
Other Minnesota Schools	(n=4)	56
Private 4-year Colleges (MN)	(n=3)	46

AVERAGE SCORE OF THOSE HAVING 135 CREDITS OR MORE (n=24) 52

AVERAGE SCORE OF THOSE HAVING 90 CREDITS OR LESS (n=33) 51

More demographic information on this sample is available in section #4 of your handout (appended). I want to deal with just a few characteristics that might be considered more directly related to the academic enterprise. Twenty-one percent of the 100 have not yet achieved degree candidacy at Metro U. (The IEP course functions partly as a screening device.) The

average score of this group was 52, so at least the average score of this population does not indicate any more serious writing problems within this group. This is one of the areas, however, that I will investigate, among other things, with a more sophisticated statistical analysis this summer.

You may be interested in what experience this sample of adult students had with college writing instruction before coming to Metro U. Of those in the sample, all but 10 had had at least one college writing course. A couple of people had had seven writing courses. The average number of writing courses transferred was 2.22.

We are interested, naturally, in what writing courses students register for after receiving their diagnostic test results. In this sample, 20 of those 79 achieving degree candidacy, or one quarter, registered in one of the subsequent five quarters for a first-level writing course. Their average score on the test was 51.

Seventeen additional writing registrations came out of the sample in those five quarters.

In a small research project done last year to follow up on the testing program, Bob Gremore found that writing course and workshop enrollments increased 53% the first quarter after initiation of testing and 150% the second quarter, compared to enrollments the previous year. In addition, Bob tracked 26 randomly selected students through testing, writing courses, and subsequent testing using the same instrument. Every student showed increased writing skill, and about ten showed dramatic improvement.

The implications of these data are that development and organization of ideas must receive a hefty portion of our attention in writing instruction. This is not to say that other matters should be ignored; certainly writing products, as well as processes, need attention. It may be that we can find ways for adult students, at least, to pursue some of the surface editing skills in a self-

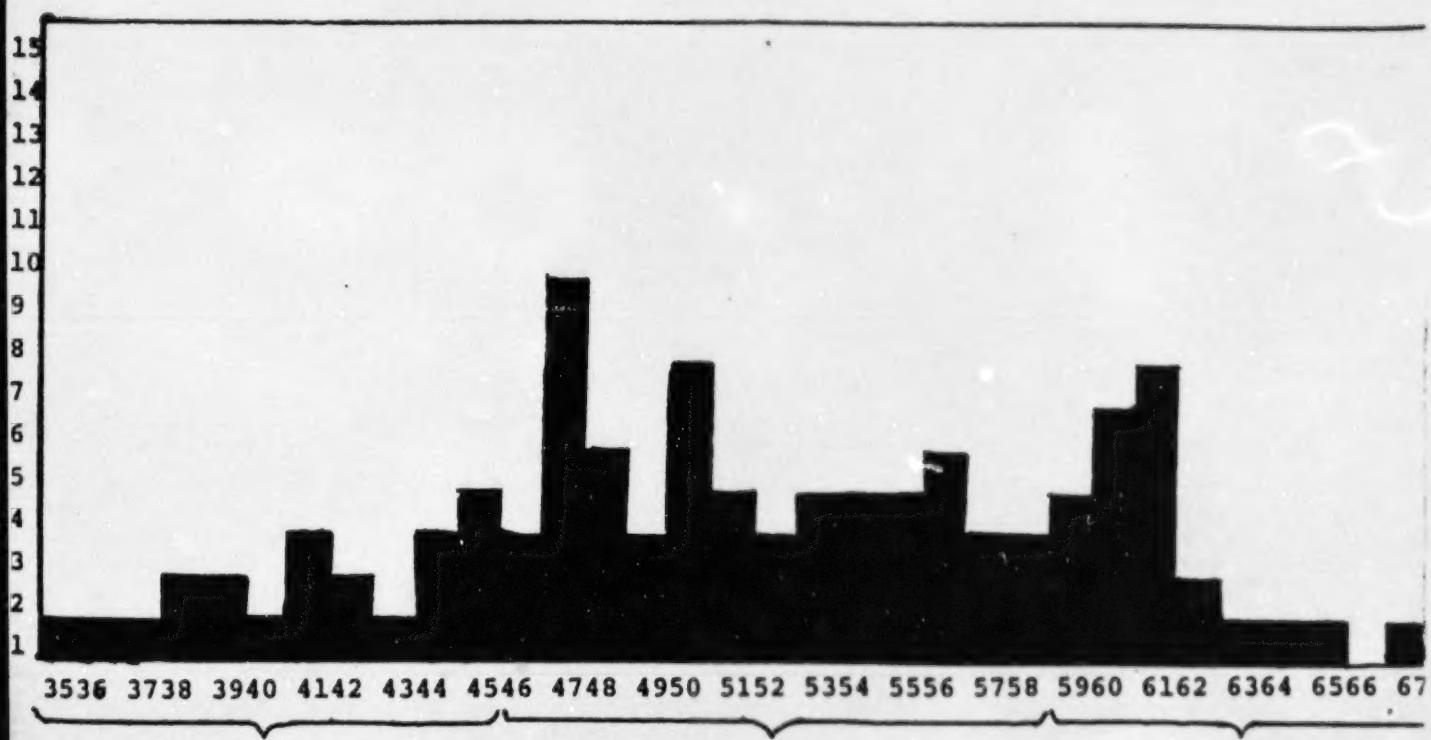
instructional format so that we can devote more of our attention to helping them do what is most difficult for them.

Further, it's apparent that adults will voluntarily take writing courses if they are given information about their writing problems. Metro U requires no writing courses, though it strongly recommends instruction when appropriate. The writing program is thriving on our recommendations.

Finally, it's apparent to me that writing instruction alone cannot produce competent writers. Otherwise, the students in this sample, who have had college writing instruction already, would be better writers. What I'm suggesting is that all subject matter teachers have an important role to play in convincing students of the importance of writing as a way of learning and as a way of communicating what they know and in helping students write better by making writing an integral part of their courses. Models exist for such all-institution efforts, and I'm convinced that people who are committed to good teaching will join these efforts.

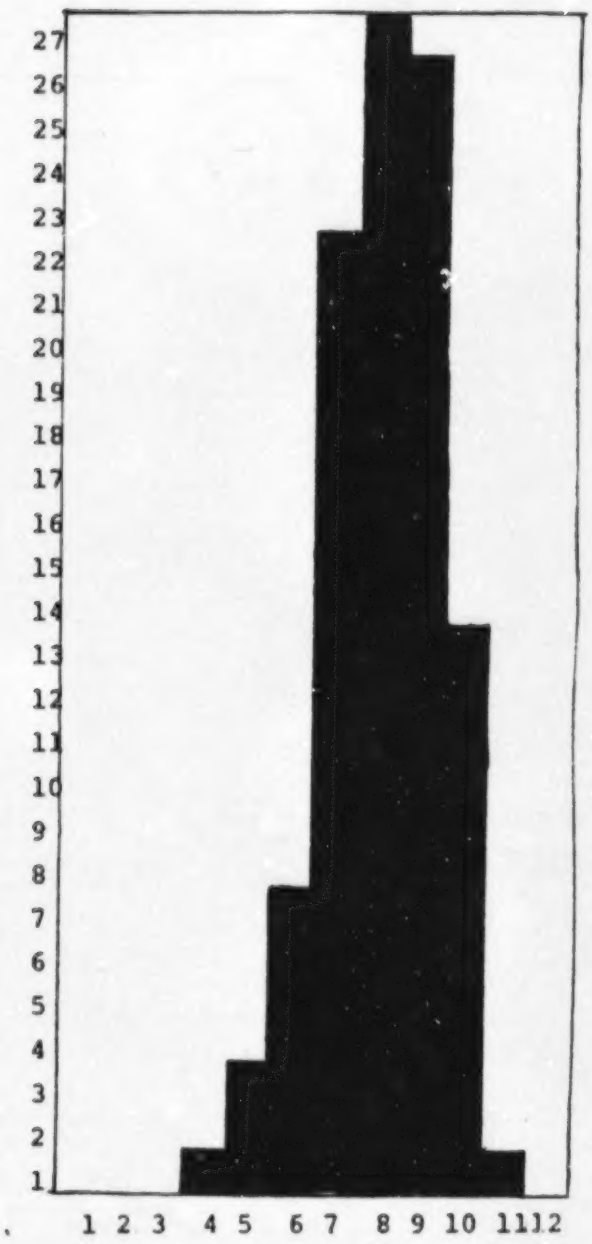
We expect to continue looking at the data I've described here for interesting correlations and patterns. We expect to ask questions about the test and the readers. We'd like to see how traditional age college students in other institutions score on this test. Finally, we want to look at the kinds of writing tasks our students do on the job, how those tasks might influence their writing, and how external demands might inform our writing instruction.

I welcome your comments and questions. Thank you.



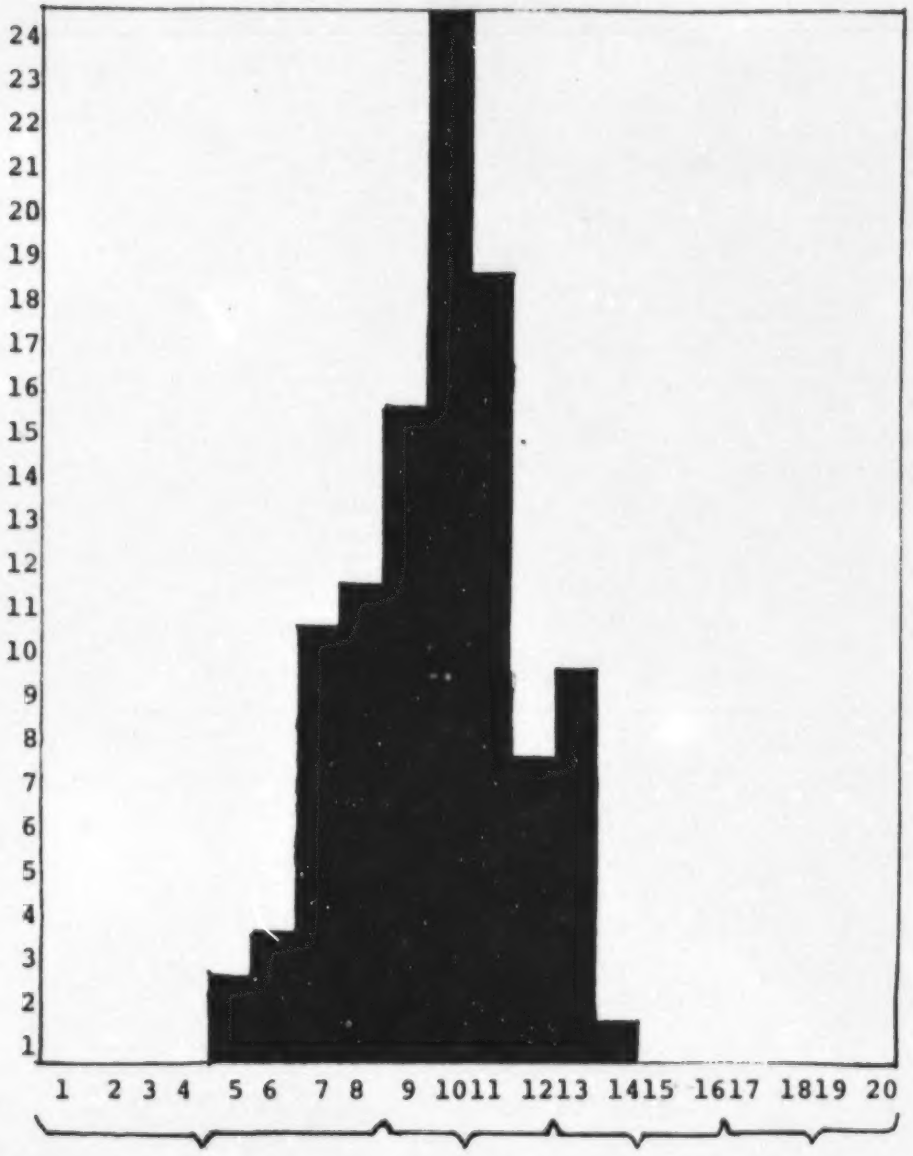
(0-45 weak, 46-58 not well developed, 59-70 satisfactory, 71-92 asset)

All Scores (complete range 0-92)



(0-4 very weak, 5-7 weak, 8-9 adequate, 10-12 strong)

Punctuation Scores



(0-8 very weak, 9-12 weak, 13-16 adequate, 17-20 strong)

Development Scores

Characteristics of Adult Students' Writing

1. AVERAGE SCORE 51.56
   MEDIAN SCORE 51

AVERAGE COMPONENT SCORES		ADJUSTED
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AVERAGE SCORE OF ENTERING STUDENTS 43 YEARS OLD OR OLDER 52 (n=14)

AVERAGE SCORES OF TRANSFERS FROM:

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56	Other Minnesota Schools	(n=4)
46	Private 4-year Colleges (MN)	(n=3)

AVERAGE SCORE OF THOSE HAVING 135 CREDITS OR MORE 52 (n=24)

AVERAGE SCORE OF THOSE HAVING 90 CREDITS OR LESS 51 (n=33)

4. Of the 100 students in the sample

35% had been in college elsewhere in 1981
64% had been in college since 1976
85% had been in college since 1971
15% had been in college 1970 or before

46 are male, 54 female

the average age was 34 years
the median age was 33 years
the youngest was 21
the oldest was 57

87% are employed at least some of the time outside the home
of those, 64% work 40 hours or more a week
39% of those 87% work in manufacturing
18% " " " health-related fields

Of the 85 students giving this information
96% were white/non-Hispanic
3% were Black
1% was Hispanic

Of the 86 students giving this information
58% were married
25% were single
16% were divorced
1% was widowed

NOTES

1. Odell, Lee, and Dixie Goswami. Writing in Non-academic Settings, final report of work done under grant #NIE-G-78-0224 of the National Institute of Education, Washington, D.C., September 1981.

2. Van Dyck, Barrie. "On-the-Job Writing of High-level Business Executives: Implications for College Teaching," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, D.C., March 13 - 15, 1980, ED 185 - 584.

3. Loris, Michelle. "Bringing the Past to the Future: Teaching Professional Writing for the Here and Now," paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Convention, Washington, D.C., November 1982.

4. Aldrich, Pearl C. "Adult Writers: Some Reasons for Ineffective Writing on the Job," College Composition and Communication, Vol. 33, No. 3, October 1982, 284-7.

5. Whiteman, Marcia Farr. "What We can Learn from Writing Research: A Review of Current Work," National Institute of Education, Washington, D.C., May 1980 (mimeo), p. 1.